Breaking News Brief  
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South Korean Public Opinion Getting Tough on China  
By Jung-Yeop WOO and Leif-Eric EASLEY

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak just completed a state visit to China. How were the bilateral meetings viewed in South Korea?  
This South Korea-China summit was held at a critical time, the first after the passing of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. The meetings in Beijing were important, not only for the policy discussions between Republic of Korea (ROK) and Chinese leaders, but also because many South Koreans have been critical of what they consider a lack of coordination and communication on the part of China since Kim Jong-il’s death. The two sides also had economic and maritime issues to address. Leadership succession in North Korea took the headlines away from an incident in December involving Chinese fishermen in South Korea’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). A Chinese fishing boat captain, in the process of being detained for illegal fishing, allegedly killed a South Korean coast guard officer. That was only the most recent in a strain of events that have South Koreans concerned about China.

Can you explain the recent downturn in South Korean opinions of China?  
Since two serious security incidents involving North Korea in 2010, South Korean views of China turned decidedly negative. National polls conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in September 2010 and 2011 suggest that developments surrounding the sinking of the South Korean naval vessel Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island by North Korea had significant effects on South Korean public opinion. When asked who is responsible for current tensions between the two Koreas, most South Koreans blamed North Korea. But 9.3% said China is most responsible and a very high number, 45%, identified China as the second most responsible party. When asked whether China will intervene on behalf of North Korea in the event of war between two Koreas, 60.1% of respondents said that was likely in 2010; the number rose to 71% in 2011. After years of improving relations, which built up South Korean expectations of Chinese evenhandedness, more and more South Koreans now believe that China is on North Korea’s side. 81.7% responded that China does not want reunification of the two Koreas, and 62.9% of respondents said that China would pose the biggest threat to a unified Korea.

Why did North Korean provocations reflect so poorly on China in the eyes of South Koreans?  
After the sinking of the Cheonan in March 2010, which killed 46 sailors, China blocked inclusion of any term or phrase that would have had the United Nations Security Council point directly to North Korea as the culprit. The position China took after the Cheonan incident was disappointing to many South Koreans, but Beijing had some cover at the time because of public controversy over the validity of a multinational investigation that implicated North Korea. North Korea’s shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010 presented no such ambiguity over responsibility. The attack killed four South Koreans, including two civilians, and injured 19. South Koreans saw China as failing to restrain North Korea and shielding it from international condemnation. This raised public consciousness that the strategic interests of the U.S. and Japan may overlap largely with those of South Korea, but that China’s strategic interests may not be as close to South Korea’s as once thought (or hoped) by many South Koreans.
How are the geopolitical and security interests of China and South Korea different?
Policy analysts generally point to different views of North Korea (including the ultimate goal of unification) and the role of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Despite increasing economic integration with South Korea, Japan, the U.S. and other countries, Chinese leaders’ strong preference for maintaining stability in the region appears to have them prioritizing the status quo with North Korea, even if it involves costs in diplomatic relations with China’s larger trading partners. The Chinese military allegedly prefers to keep U.S. forces on the other side of a strategic buffer. After the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents, China heavily criticized the ROK-U.S. military exercise in the Yellow Sea off the west coast of the Korean Peninsula. Chinese policymakers also worry about an influx of refugees and spiraling uncertainty in case of a North Korean collapse. This is why Beijing tends to shield North Korea from pressure that might destabilize the regime, which may be even more of an issue now as the North Korean regime is in transition after the death of Kim Jong-il.

Economics must be a big part of the strategic picture as well. Can you talk about the economic angle?
This year marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Seoul and Beijing. In two decades, trade between South Korea and China has increased nearly 30-fold. The trade volume between South Korea and China now exceeds South Korea’s trade with the U.S. and Japan combined. South Koreans are well aware of how important China is economically, and also realize that Beijing holds key pieces of the puzzle regarding how to deal with Pyongyang. China and North Korea have advanced numerous agreements regarding trade, infrastructure and investment in the past year. China and North Korea’s joint economic projects are of concern to South Korea in terms of Beijing’s implementation of UN nuclear sanctions, implications for North Korean economic reform, and whether China’s economic influence in North Korea is coming at South Korea’s expense.

What are the prospects for South Korean views of China going forward?
It remains to be seen how enduring the effects of the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong attacks will be for South Korean public opinion. But unless Beijing is prepared to respond responsibly to North Korea in the eyes of the world, it is to be expected that the gap of perception between South Korea and China will widen further. With both legislative and presidential elections upcoming in South Korea this year, the electoral landscape is complicated, and public opinion can affect the direction of foreign policy. Already, fear of dependence on China may have provided tailwinds for last year’s ratification of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. Even though many politicians in the opposition parties (as well as some in the ruling party) believe that ROK foreign policy may be too closely aligned with Washington, there is little electoral advantage to be gained by looking soft on China after the events of 2010. Negative opinions of China are influencing South Korean foreign policy debates, and may play into the strategic calculations of the next administration. To regain the trust of the South Korean people, Beijing needs to be seen as more closely coordinating policy with Seoul.

Jung-Yeop WOO (woo@asaninst.org) is a Research Fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul. Leif-Eric EASLEY (easley@asaninst.org) is Assistant Professor in the Division of International Studies at Ewha University and a Research Fellow at the Asan Institute. Both authors were previously fellows at the USC Korean Studies Institute. This brief draws from a longer report available from the Asan Institute (http://asaninst.org/upload_eng/board_files/file1_597.pdf).